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# Review of Shagdariin Sandag and Harry Kendall, *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsan Mongolian Massacres, 1921-1941*

Christopher P. Atwood  
*University of Pennsylvania*, [catwood@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:catwood@sas.upenn.edu)

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At the time of publication, author Christopher P. Atwood was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently, he is a faculty member in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

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# Review of Shagdariin Sandag and Harry Kendall, *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choibalsan Mongolian Massacres, 1921-1941*

## **Disciplines**

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## **Comments**

At the time of publication, author Christopher P. Atwood was affiliated with Indiana University. Currently, he is a faculty member in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department at the University of Pennsylvania.

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choi balsan Mongolian Massacres by Shagdariin Sandag and Harry H. Kendall

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prehistory of written law in China. What was resisted, Dull says, was not the laws themselves, but their taking on “a life of their own ... [to] be used to challenge the authority of official policies and values.”

Davis, California

Benjamin E. Wallacker

Sandag, Shagdariin, and Harry H. Kendall. *Poisoned Arrows: The Stalin-Choi-balsan Mongolian Massacres, 1921–1941*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000). xx + 228 pp., \$ 65.00. ISBN 0-8133-3710-0.

Mongolia’s democratic transition (or revolution) of 1990 opened up what had been one of the most isolated and tightly controlled regimes in the world. Lacking the large exile communities that have played such a large role in preserving and developing non-official versions of history in other dictatorial regimes, the Communist government of Mongolia from 1921 maintained a firm control on what was written and said about its history all over the world to a degree surprising even among the likes North Korea or Laos. When party control was replaced by pluralism, and the archives were opened to domestic and foreign researchers un beholden to the ruling Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party, observers expected dramatic revelations of the regime’s brutal past. Ten years later, Shagdariin Sandag’s *Poisoned Arrows* claims to fulfill that expectation.

For those Mongolian-history buffs familiar only with the apologetic versions of the Mongolian People’s Republic peddled in English-language translations of official histories or in Owen Lattimore’s later works, *Poisoned Arrows* will come as a shock. Sandag sets out in this book to launch a full-scale attack on the entire legacy of the regime, rewriting its entire history from the viewpoint of a dedicated and thorough-going anti-Communist. Unlike previous such critical histories written in English by writers like George Murphy and Robert Rupen, Sandag writes as an insider, one whose own father fell victim to the blood-purges of the 1930s and who has harbored a deep bitterness toward the regime ever since.

For those familiar with the contemporary work on modern Mongolian history, however, *Poisoned Arrows* is an almost embarrassing example of the inadequacies of the “history-as-prosecutor’s-brief” genre that emerged out of the sudden collapse of Communism in Mongolia. From virtually every point of view – interpretation, argumentation, sources, factual accuracy, and even copy editing – *Poisoned Arrows* will not stand the test of time. Sandag’s tone of passionate and outraged denunciation will be grating to those used to the blander prose of academic history, yet the outrage is not the problem. When he writes of Choibalsang, Mongolia’s dictator from 1936 to 1952, that he “had clambered over mounds of slain bodies of his revolutionary colleagues, close friends, and tens of thousands of innocent victims of communist terrorism and massacres” he is not going beyond what the sober documentary evidence will support. What is the problem, is that he uses that outrage to substitute for a coherent explanation of what actually happened in Mongolia from 1921 to 1940. This is the task of history and Sandag unfortunately evades it.

What is a historian of modern Mongolia to do with the Revolution, specifically that of 1921, and more generally, the whole process that thoroughly transformed

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the country over the next decades? Those who approve of the liberation from China and the social and intellectual modernization that this revolution brought (as Dr. Sandag clearly does) must face squarely the fact that this modernization for decades was inextricably associated with Communism and hence with an increasingly grotesque system of persecution, mendacity, and servility. In this situation, Sandag, like many other historians of Mongolia have an easy, indeed, too easy way out: credit Mongol heroes with all the good and blame the Soviet agents for all the bad. As Sandag tells it, the Revolution of 1921 was made by market-minded democrats whose humane ideas were pushed and distorted into a Communist-style police state through Soviet pressure alone. Only Soviet pressure, he argues, could have caused Mongol leaders to begin shooting each other with in less than a year of the revolution's victory. Parallel cases of purely indigenous revolutionary fratricide from France to China are never addressed.

Were the Mongolian leaders really democratic? Sandag repeatedly assures us they were but presents no evidence that the Mongolian revolutionaries had any interest in multi-party elections and legally guaranteed freedoms of speech, press, and association that make up the core of what is commonly meant by democracy. Sandag's insistence on separating the good democratic revolutionaries from Choibalsan and his few evil henchmen who did Stalin's bidding leads him into repeated embarrassment, when his democratic victims turn out to have participated eagerly in the previous years' purges. Soliin Danzan is a victim of Choibalsan and El'bekdorji Rinchino when he is shot in 1924, but somehow a befuddled dupe when he shoots Bodoo in 1922. Ts. Dambadorj was persecuted by the Comintern in 1928 and after, but Sandag omits his vigorous support of the execution of Danzan. Sandag spills much ink on the injustices done to Laagan, Shijee, Badrakh, and others but downplays the fact that in 1928 they were the ones in Mongolia baying for the blood of Dambadorj (who had, by the way, imprisoned Laagan for criticizing the Central Committee – hardly a democratic thing to do) and demanding the disastrous collectivization campaign. An informed sympathy would have done better than this crude dichotomy of good democrats and evil Communists in explaining the bitter dilemmas that all Mongol politicians faced in the 1920s and 1930s, and the often undemocratic means they chose to solve them.

Sandag does not help his case by using the same methods of innuendo and gossip that so often defaced Communist historiography. The Communist historians once (without any basis) accused the lamas of poisoning Sükhe-Baatar, so now Sandag will accuse the Russians of poisoning Sükhe-Baatar (and the Jebdzundamba Khutugtu as well). No actual evidence of foul play is presented, and L. Bat-Ochir's careful assessment of the issues involved is first caricatured and then ridiculed. Repeating Mongolian rumors that Genden chased Stalin around the table and pulled his moustache is a poor substitute for a serious discussion of Genden's aims and policies, including his own malicious involvement in the bogus "Lhümbe case."

The vast bulk of Sandag's sources are not original archival documents, but "processed" versions of them published in the Mongolian newspapers. Despite appearances, therefore, *Poisoned Arrows* is not a work of primary research but of secondary synthesis. Even so, the bibliography contains no works after 1995,

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and Sandag seems ignorant of major book length studies from the early 1990s, such as Sh. Agwaan's *Kh. Choibalsan ba Dotood Yawdlyn Yaam*, or S. Battogtokh's *Nuuts khuiwaldaanaas nugalaaw zawkhrald*.

Finally, repeated errors of fact and extremely sloppy editing make this book an undependable source of information. Ts. Damdinsüren was not "ignored" by the Communist government (p. 144), the Chojin Lamiin Sum and the Bogdo Khan palace were made into museums, not "devastated and ignored" (p. 126), *boshgiig khalakh* is a calque translation of Chinese *geming* and means "revolutionary" not just "to change power," the Diluwa Khutugtu was hoping to visit Wutai Shan, the mountain, in 1928, not Utai Yang, a (mythical) person (p. 123). The Fat Ulzii who deviously decoys Bekh-Ochir to his arrest on p. 113 is the same man as the Tserengiin Ulzii arrested and shot after a show trial in the Ulaanbaatar Central Theater (pp. 107, 112), although the text nowhere makes this plain. The Soviet adviser Jilin of p. 80 is actually the same as the Zimin of p. 81, and so on. A retired diplomat, Harry H. Kendall, is listed as co-author; one would have thought that with two people looking over the text some of these errors might have been caught.

*Poisoned Arrows* does contain many interesting and important stories that have appeared for the first time in English. The description of Altanbulag reveals an often-forgotten cosmopolitanism in Mongolia's history in the 1920s. Many of the historic photographs (especially those scattered between pp. 65 and 108) are valuable and well-reproduced. Yet the whole is less than the sum of the parts. For English-speaking readers interested in a narrative of the Mongol purges, Baabar's *Twentieth Century Mongolia* is a far better source, although here too the translation is poorly edited. *Poisoned Arrows* cannot be recommended.

Indiana University

Christopher P. Atwood

Baabar (Bat-Erdene Batbayar): *Twentieth Century Mongolia*, edited by C. Kaplonski. (Cambridge: The White Horse Press, 1999), xv + 448 pp., no price, ISBN 1-874267-41-3.

Baabar's *Twentieth Century Mongolia* is the first part of an ambitious project: to present, after years of official historiography made for the benefice of the former political regime, a new version of the history of Mongolia during this last century or, more precisely, its history from the autonomy period up to the democratization process, from 1911 to 1992. This book consists of three parts, the first one, "the steppe warriors," gives a general background on the history of the Mongols up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the second part, "incarnations and revolutionaries", describes the autonomous period and the beginning of the independence (1911–1924); and the last part, "a puppet republic," outlines the first two decades of the Mongolian People's Republic, from the death of the theocratic leader in 1924 to the acceptance of the results of the independence referendum by the Chinese in 1946. According to the author, another volume should follow, with a description of the period from 1946 to 1990 on the one hand, and the democratization process up to the adoption of the new constitution in 1992 on the other.

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